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Arkansas Democrats seek more details on Iraq plan

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WASHINGTON - The state's Democrats in Congress on Wednesday demanded more details from President Bush on his plan to send more troops to Iraq, with two Arkansas lawmakers saying the strategy is a repeat of failed plans in the past.

Arkansas' two senators were reluctant to support Bush's proposal unless he specifies goals for the additional troops and a timeline for withdrawal from Iraq.

Reps. Vic Snyder, D-Little Rock, and Mike Ross, D-Prescott, said the president offered nothing new.

"It's a flawed plan, it's a failed policy and I think it's going to be a mistake," Ross said. "This is anything but a new direction. This is more of the same, which has not been working."

In a nationally televised address, the president said he would send more than 20,000 troops to Iraq. Most will be stationed in Baghdad where they are expected to assist Iraqi forces trying to stop violence between rival Muslim groups.

The military buildup will not immediately impact Arkansas National Guard units, said Guard spokesman Lt. Chris Heathscott.

Bush took responsibility for failures in Iraq, but said ending U.S. involvement in the unpopular war now would cause the Iraqi government to collapse and lead to widespread deaths.

The state's only Republican in Congress, Rep. John Boozman, said Bush was contrite but determined to win the war. Boozman was confident that joining with the Iraqi government to stop sectarian violence is the answer.

"If we are unsuccessful, or if we step back now, the problem in Iraq will become more lethal and make our troops fight an uglier battle than we are seeing today," Boozman, R-Rogers, said.

Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., said Bush had the "burden of proof" over whether more troops are necessary.

Pryor and Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., are opposed to the troop increase without hearing specifics from Bush. On the other hand, neither supports withholding money for the additional troops.

"I'm not satisfied with the level of detail I heard," Pryor said. "I didn't hear any time frame for how long these 20,000 troops will stay in Baghdad. Sixty days? One-hundred-twenty days? A year? He also didn't say what types of things they would specifically be doing."

Lincoln said the president should set out clear benchmarks for success.

"Without measuring sticks, the president is only continuing this open-ended commitment of troops,

which has proven to be a failed policy," Lincoln said.

Ross said Bush should have added troops long ago if that was the answer.

Snyder, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, said he is eager to hear details of the plan from Pentagon officials today.

"I think I have more questions than answers," he said. "I don't see a dramatically new strategy."

Snyder and Armed Services colleagues met with Bush last week. Snyder said the president was privately discouraged by the war effort, but gave no reassurances that his new plan would be successful.

"I don't see what's different now than before," Snyder said.

Ross said he thought both Democrats and Republicans would oppose Bush's plan.

"I think the president is going to have a hard time even persuading his own party to embrace this idea," Ross said.

Ross was one of nine conservative Democrats to meet with senior White House advisers before the speech Wednesday.

He said he could not back a proposal that would mobilize more National Guard and reserve troops.

More than 8,000 Arkansas guard troops have served in the Middle East since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Seventeen have died.

About 1,600 Arkansas-based troops are currently in Iraq and 300 more are preparing for deployment this year.

"My first concern is the well-being of all our men and women in uniform, especially those from Arkansas," Gov. Mike Beebe said. "I will be interested in seeing the details of the president's plan for future troop deployments and how that plan could affect the Arkansas National Guard."

Rep. Marion Berry, D-Gillett, said the president did not convince him that the strategy will be successful. Berry prefers a diplomatic approach to the conflict, and he urged Bush to follow recommendations set forth by the Iraq Study Group. Those recommendations include working with other countries in the Middle East on a Democratic solution.

"... This is an international conflict that cannot be solved by U.S. military strategies alone," he said.

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